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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL IN KERALA

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11. (SBU) Summary: The 21.6 million voters in the state of Kerala will go to polls on April 16 in the first of five phases of India's national elections. During a road tour of Kerala, we found the Congress party in an upbeat mood expecting to win a majority of the 20 seats that are up for grabs, thus reversing the terrible defeat it suffered in 2004 when it failed to win a single seat. The ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and its allies are scrambling to counter the Congress alliance's momentum. Voter disenchantment with the CPM-led state government weighs heavily on the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF). The CPM's attempts to bring in Muslim voters by aligning with a controversial Islamic party have taken center stage. The consensus is that Congress is likely to gain at least ten seats despite concerns that the party's New Delhi-centered candidate selection is out of sync with local sentiments and could result in setbacks in a few constituencies. End summary.

Congress in an upbeat mood

12. (SBU) The Congress party is hoping to make dramatic gains in Kerala when the state's 21.6 million voters go to the polls on April 16 to elect 20 members of Parliament. During a recent trip from Thiruvananthapuram in the south to Palakkad in the north, we met with a wide range of people, including journalists, candidates, party officials, and agricultural workers. Many believed the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) coalition is on the upswing. They often cited Kerala's traditionally strong anti-incumbency as benefiting the out-of-power UDF. "We think we will get 17 seats, at least 15," said Pandalam Sudhakaran, a former Congress minister who is campaigning for former UN Under-Secretary General and Congress candidate in Thiruvananthapuram, Shashi Tharoor. Many journalists expressed similar expectations for the Congress. Their predictions ranged from 12-15 for the UDF, with the Congress getting 9-12 seats of that total. The Congress is contesting in 17 constituencies leaving two to its ally the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and one to the Kerala Congress (M), a

party that split off from the Congress in 1979. On the LDF side, the CPM is contesting in 14 constituencies, the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 4, Kerala Congress (J) in one, with one seat contested by an independent candidate aligned with the left front.

#### CPM on the defensive

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13. (SBU) Education Minister M.A. Baby's overview of the state's political scene made clear the CPM's defensive posture. According to Baby, the state's anti-CPM press is using the bribery scandal involving the CPM's state secretary Pinarayi Vijayan (ref C) to pillory the party. "We are trying to correct the perception, but the newspaper campaign is bound to have some impact," he said. Baby also admitted that the pastoral letter sent by the Catholic bishops (ref B) urging their parishioners to vote against the CPM could affect his party's prospects. Baby believes that the CPM's opponents are willing to use anything to discredit the party. He seemed resigned, saying "all's fair in love and war. Politics is mostly war with very little love." In Palakkad, a local journalist observed that the morale of the CPM is very low compared to past elections.

#### CPM turns to Muslim voters to revive its fortunes

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14. (SBU) According to many observers, Kerala's CPM suffers from a lack of allies who can deliver votes. The CPM's major ally, the CPI, has little support outside of the trade unions. The Kerala Congress (J) is weakened after several Catholic bishops stopped backing the party. The Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Janata Dal (S) are depleted by infighting. In contrast, Congress and the

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UDF can rely on the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), which is still a dominant force, to deliver Muslim votes and the Kerala Congress (M) remains popular in Central Kerala.

15. (SBU) The CPM's tactical decision to use the controversial, but popular, Islamic leader, Abdul Nasser Madhani (ref C), is widely seen as an effort to break the IUML's "monopoly" on Muslim votes and attract them to the LDF. Some journalists believed that the CPM has promised Madhani's People's Democratic Party (PDP) full-fledged membership in the LDF at some later point. The media storm following Madhani's appearance on stage with CPM officials forced the CPM to back-pedal on its relationship with the PDP. Baby treaded carefully when discussing the PDP: he said the CPM had unilaterally accepted the support of the PDP and was in no way offering its endorsement to the PDP. In addition to playing the PDP card, the CPM has effectively mobilized its own popular leaders from the Muslim community in an effort to target this important voting bloc. Muslims comprise 24% of the state's electorate, and are considered crucial to success in more than half of the state's parliamentary constituencies.

16. (SBU) Congress's ally IUML appears to be losing its vise-like grip on Kerala's Muslim voters. Several journalists remarked that this election could be the first where Kerala's Muslim vote splits. In addition to the CPM's strong play via the PDP, there are several other smaller Muslim parties looking to pick off votes from the IUML's vote bloc. At the same time, the CPM's enlistment of the controversial PDP may lead to a backlash from those Christian and Hindu voters who would normally be aligned with the CPM. As a result, the CPM may actually experience a net loss, gaining the support of the PDP's supporters at the expense of losing from the larger pool of moderate voters from the Christian and Hindu communities.

#### India's relations with Israel and the U.S.

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17. (SBU) Although Indian elections normally center on local issues, the CPM's election rhetoric is infused with foreign affairs. The CPM derides India's defense relations with Israel and its strategic partnership with the United States. Loudspeakers decked with the

CPM's hammer and sickle flags blast epithets at the Congress party, calling its leaders "slaves of imperialism" and "stooges of the U.S." On the streets of one town we heard an announcement blaring that "a dollar spent on buying Israeli weapons is a dollar spent on its war against the Palestinians." Journalists in Thiruvananthapuram told us that Congress candidate Shashi Tharoor has been facing intense media scrutiny of his past writings, some of which commend Israel. Local CPM leaders have portrayed Tharoor as an "American agent."

K.V. Thomas, Congress's candidate in Cochin, is under fire for having presented a memento to a former Israeli Prime Minister years ago during his visit to India. In attacking Congress for its close ties to the United States, the CPM is portraying the United States as anti-Muslim in hopes of pulling in Muslim voters. The CPM also refers to the U.S.-India civil nuclear cooperation agreement. Interestingly, CPM references to the deal indicate that the party would only amend the deal; the CPM does not say it would entirely scrap it.

Kerala Congress leaders resent New Delhi's dictates  
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18. (SBU) The Congress party's traditionally New Delhi-centered decision-making has been out of sync with local sentiments in Kerala. For example, Shashi Tharoor's candidacy has raised the hackles of many prominent Congress leaders in Thiruvananthapuram. Journalists pointed out that many Youth Congress leaders were disappointed with Tharoor's selection and have yet to become fully active in his campaign. Disappointment over the refusal of the Cochin ticket to a widely popular young Congress leader, Hibi Eden,

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fueled a negative reaction so strong that the leader of the state's Congress party distanced himself from it.

All politics is local  
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19. (SBU) Our visit to Kerala made clear that although the elections are national, they amount to a vast conglomeration of intensely local contests. We found that at the village level people had vastly different opinions on what was important in the election. Local development, the presence of independents and rebels in the fray, and caste/community issues were all at play. For example, we watched local villagers complaining to a candidate about water hyacinth which clogged canals making them impassable and forcing the villagers into the back breaking work of carting their rice harvest over land. Caste was the issue in Thiruvananthapuram, where many talked about the BSP candidate who will not win but might affect the race by drawing votes from the predominant Nadar caste to which he belongs. Locals at a road side tea shop in Chalakkudy expressed their support for a philanthropist who has built free toilets for the community's poor and is running as an independent candidate. Many at the tea shop expressed disgust with the state's CPM government, while questions about the UPA in New Delhi drew more neutral reactions.

Communists and Congress back together again?  
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110. (SBU) CPM leader Baby and CPI National Secretary D. Raja told us that the non-Congress, non-BJP parties' chances are brightening. According to Baby, the parties will sit together after the polls and forge a common minimum program "which should not be too difficult." According to Baby, the CPM has amended its party program to enable the party to be part of a coalition government should the situation warrant it. He clarified that the CPM has not offered its support to the Congress in the post-poll scenario, but it would accept support from the Congress, if necessary. Congress leaders, on the other hand, believe that the left parties will have no alternative to supporting the Congress after the elections.

BJP stands alone  
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111. (SBU) The BJP is fighting it out alone in Kerala. Its best

hopes are in Thiruvananthapuram in the contest against Congress's Shashi Tharoor. The four-cornered contest between the UDF, LDF, the BJP and the BSP gives the BJP candidate a faint hope of winning the seat. For the most part, however, the BJP candidates are not campaigning very seriously in Kerala.

Congress looks to solid gains

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Local issues and concerns are driving Kerala's elections, and they are driving them in favor of the Congress party and its allies. Attitudes toward the state's ruling CPM, its scams and squabbles, its alliances and patronage, all seem to be key issues rather than national politics. In a state where anti-incumbency is the rule, voter ire is directed at the state rather than the central government. The CPM is clearly gambling on splitting the Muslim vote in Kerala. Pulling off some surprise victories in Muslim-dominated key constituencies could help it stop the bleeding in this electoral cycle. But it may also lead to a possible backlash against the CPM's Muslim focus by Hindus and Christians, which will benefit the UDF, or possibly even the BJP, in the long run. On the eve of voters going to the polls the consensus is that Congress will pick up at least ten seats in Kerala, likely more. End comment.

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